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featuring **ASYLUM EARTH** a novel by Bruce Elliott

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SCIENTIFIC FICTION

STARTLING STORIES

OCT. 1953

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Vol. 27, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION

stories

October, 1952

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ASYLUM EARTH **Bruce Elliott** **10**

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A Novelet

THE GUIDED MAN **L. Sprague de Camp** **74**

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Short Stories

THROWBACK **Miriam Allen deFord** **65**

Was she an atavism, a freak, a criminal, or just a mother?

NOTICE OF INTENT **Phyllis Sterling Smith** **95**

They tried to corner the drug market, but missed one angle

GRAVESONG **Walter Miller, Jr.** **108**

Emilish knew Man had conquered space — but at what price?

DISPOSAL **Stanley Whiteside** **118**

Clipper's magic space - consumers provided instant transit!

Features

THE ETHER VIBRATES **The Editor** **6**

WHAT'S UP DOWN THERE? **Lewis Island** **9**

THE OUTCOME (Verse) **J. B. Wood** **73**

FOUR CENTURIES OF PLANETS **R. S. Richardson** **105**

CURRENT FAN PUBLICATIONS **Jerome Bixby** **141**

SCIENCE FICTION BOOKSHELF **Book Reviews** **144**

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*They tried to corner the drug market,
but they overlooked one possibility . . .*



NOTICE OF INTENT

By PHYLLIS STERLING SMITH

THE PLANET hung over the edge of the prairie, magnified by the horizon, red and unwinking.

I've been there, thought Kent.

The thought carried no conviction.

He sank wearily onto a step of the small back porch and leaned his head

against the post. He couldn't go in just yet. He had to think—to plan. Had to have an answer to the question of what to do next.

He could hear Jean moving softly about the tiny kitchen. The sound of her feet blended with the small night sounds,

the grass rustling, the distant croak of the bull-frog by the stream in the northwest pasture. But from the big barn there was no sound. In his mind's eye he could see the cattle, lying on their sides in the straw, great brown eyes pleading for help that was not his to give.

The door opened a crack, shooting a shaft of light across the rough boards to where he sat. Jean peered out, and though her head was only a dark silhouette against the light of the kitchen, her attitude was one of worry and concern.

"I've made coffee," she said.

She stood silently for a minute. "There's nothing you can do for them, then?" she asked at last. Her voice had a purposefully flat and unemotional quality, as though to deny the importance of the question.

"Good God, woman! What do you expect me to do without the drugs I need? I'm no faith healer!" Kent was surprised by the violence of his answer. More surprised yet that he had lashed out so at Jean—Jean, whom he wanted only to cherish and protect.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You know that it's not you I'm mad at." He managed a crooked smile as he followed her into the kitchen.

"I know," she answered quickly. "I feel the same way."

The kitchen had a cared-for, well-scrubbed look, but was only sparsely furnished. Their slender capital had gone for pure-bred dairy stock and there had been little left for luxuries such as plastic flooring or kitchen curtains. And now the cattle were dying. . . .

"Do you have any idea what the disease is?" Jean asked, setting the steaming cup of coffee before him.

Kent sighed. "Nothing we're familiar with. Nothing that responds to the usual treatment. I suspect that it's one of our imports. One of those gifts to mankind that we brought back from Mars with us!" His voice was bitter. "The maddening thing is that I know what to do. One shot of Marcillin, and

ping! It's—well, really, it's a miracle. If you could only have seen the experiments with the hamsters!"

"Marcillin!" Jean said the word lovingly. "Your drug."

Kent shook his head. "Not my drug any more," he sighed. "What I wouldn't give for a little of it now!"

"We might be able—" Jean spoke hesitantly. "We could get a second mortgage maybe. I know Marcillin's expensive, but—"

"Do you know what the current extortion rate is for Marcillin?" he demanded. "We couldn't afford one dose for a human, let alone enough for a whole herd of cows. It would cost more than a new herd—more than the whole farm, probably!"

HE RAISED the coffee to his mouth, and the cup rattled against his teeth. His hand was shaking with futile anger. He tried to remind himself that it was only his business at stake, only his future. How would he feel, he asked himself, if it were Jean who were ill, dying for want of a drug that should be available to everyone? He knew that such things happened every day, every hour, every minute. The drug that he had dreamed would free the earth of its everpresent fear of disease was serving, instead, to enrich the bank accounts of a few!

"I'd go to Kezar labs and steal it if I thought I could get away with it," he said reflectively. In the startled silence, he could hear the electric clock buzzing on the shelf over the stove. He shook his head sadly. "It wouldn't work, though. They guard it more carefully than the U.S. Mint."

She tried a shaky smile. It was undoubtedly meant to be cheerful and reassuring. "We can manage with Rupert. It's a good thing that the what's-it attacks only the cows. As long as—"

"As long as Rupert doesn't get it, too," growled Kent. "I was only guessing when I told you that! I'm no fortune-teller! How do I know what it'll attack?"

There I go again, he thought, *scolding at Jean because she's the only one around to take it out on.*

"The bull is sick, too," he explained lamely. "He doesn't have it as badly as the cows, but if it follows the same course—well, I doubt if Rupert will win any prizes at the International Fair this year."

"Oh!" Jean's voice was stricken. She rose abruptly and poured herself a cup of coffee, making quite a business of it, rattling the dishes noisily. She kept her head averted. Kent had a horrible suspicion that she was hiding tears.

"Listen!" he said harshly. "This time isn't like the others! This time I really will find a way. We won't lose the farm. I'll find a way—"

She didn't answer.

"I'll see how they're doing," he muttered and stumbled out the door and toward the barn.

The red planet was higher now. He tried to make his mind bridge the space between earth and Mars. *I've been there*, he thought futilely. It was beyond imagining. The human mind seemed a puny thing, after all, scarcely capable of thinking of little distances on earth—say, the two thousand miles to New York City—save in terms of words and numbers. Imagine a distance of millions of miles? Impossible! The best he could do was to translate it into time of travel. Day after endless day of travel. Days when he had become convinced that they weren't going at all, that the ship was suspended there forever, locked on an imaginary line between earth and Mars.

In a way, perhaps, the weary spirit-draining delay had been a good thing. It had prepared him for failure. He had left earth confident that he, Kent Roberts, would change the face of the earth with the flora of Mars, that earth's deserts would flower with useful crops garnered on the desert planet. He must have been plausible in his arguments, too. The government and the Kezar Industries, co-sponsors of that first trip

to Mars, had made room for him in the strictly limited accommodations of the space ship.

KENT HAD failed in his purpose, of course. Only the most primitive kinds of plants flourish on Mars. But by the time he had stood on that vast and desolate Martian desert, space had humbled him. He wasn't surprised.

"The first of my failures," Kent thought grimly. "I seem to have a talent for them."

This seemed destined to be another. Klover Kween, the champion milk producer, was dead. Rupert, the farm's largest single asset, was definitely sick. Kent went slowly from stall to stall doing what he could for the others. The beams of the gasoline lantern bobbed before him, lighting the sturdy beams and rafters of the barn that he had built to last through all the years of his life. Poignantly the realization came to him that if he failed this time, the loss would be of more than just his livelihood. This may not have been the future that he had once planned for himself, but he and Jean had made a good thing of it.

There had to be a way to get the Marcillin!

Kent rubbed his hand across his forehead. He tried to think. He couldn't buy it; he couldn't steal it. Could he beg it?

Small chance of that!

He could imagine Dr. Thyler—or for that matter, any of the executive personnel at Kezar Industries—getting such a request. What a laugh that would be! Kent Roberts asking for a gift of Marcillin when they couldn't even trust the crazy fool to handle it their way in the laboratory!

A fly reeled into the path of the gasoline lantern, already dizzy from the insecticides with which the barn was sprayed. Kent swatted at it with unwonted vigor.

Kent's boots scuffed through the loose straw on the floor of the barn. But in imagination he walked again the cold

dry desert of Mars.

Marcillin! The soft mold of distinctive reddish-gray color had grown in the crevasses that scored the Martian plain. It was one of the few dozen "plants" that he had been able to collect, scraping it carefully from the cold rock, hiding his disappointment over the failure of his dreams for a more abundant earth by pouring his zeal into the collection of specimens. Lichens and molds. Not of much practical use to mankind. Unless. . . .

On a wild hunch he had started testing the anti-biotic properties of the molds he had collected. The first few tests yielded no results. Then he tried the red mold. The first tests, casually done, were followed by others, each done with growing enthusiasm. The stuff was miraculous!

He had tended his specimens lovingly on the long trip home—the longer because of his feverish impatience to get back to the laboratories of earth with his prize. He had protected them from moisture, insulated them from heat—not an easy task in the sunbaked hull of a space ship.

And when at last he had unpacked them from the refrigerated tanks, and with all the facilities of the great Kezar pharmaceutical labs at his disposal, he had run some really rigorous tests. Even Kent, the farmer, smiled now, remembering.

Marcillin, he had called it. Specific against every disease known to earth, plus those unknown others that they soon realized had been unintentional cargo of the space ship on its return flight, and which didn't respond to any of the earth-grown antibiotics.

The honor and the glory had been his—for a time.

Kezar Industries had naturally expected him to work for them. They had sponsored the flight, had they not? The salary and position they offered him were such as to render him willing. But the real attraction was the laboratory. Here was the ideal place to carry on his

researches into the propagation of the mold. Already the Martian plagues were raging over the earth. What was needed was a large supply of Marcillin, and soon.

HE DUPLICATED the Martian atmosphere and temperature, with no results. An interesting problem, he had thought, outlining a new series of experiments.

Kent, the farmer, looked at his dying cattle and laughed at Kent, the biologist. He had been so ingenious—had thought that Dr. Thyler didn't understand the importance of the tests when he ordered Kent to another project. He had remonstrated in vain. It had taken him a while to understand that it was to the advantage of Kezar Industries to keep the supply of Marcillin small. There was another space ship on the way to Mars—again co-sponsored by Kezar.

There would be a new supply of the pure Martian mold on the return trip. Reproduce it on earth? Then any two-bit pharmaceutical house could put it on the market! But only Kezar had the know-how when it came to space travel.

Those weren't the reasons that were given him, of course. They were the ones he had figured out for himself, in an agony of bitter disillusionment. People were dying and Kezar Industries planned to limit the cure! Wrathfully he had struck out at them, threatened to take it to court, threatened publicity. Such things couldn't happen in a free country!

He had learned differently. They came to him, the quiet men of the security bureau. The government was interested in Marcillin. It was the answer to bacteriological warfare. In view of the fact that Kezar labs considered him a bad security risk, it might be better if he would resign.

"Resign, hell!" he had exploded. "I quit! I'll break this blasted monopoly if its the last thing I ever do!"

He applied for his old position at the university. But the rumor had preceded

him. Dr. Kent Roberts was a bad security risk. In view of the many government financed research projects. . . .

The extent of the conspiracy appalled him. A few weeks before he could have asked for almost any position he desired. Now none was open to him. Neither industrial nor academic laboratories had room for a "bad security risk."

He determined to finance his own research. Then it was that he found that Marcillin would not be sold to him for research purposes.

He and Jean bought the farm. Here, at least, he had freedom of a sort, where he could put his own ideas into practice. Or so it had seemed. Kent sighed and turned off the lantern.

It was lighter now, and only a few stars still shone. There was the red one, red with life-saving mold. He gazed at it with baffled longing.

Can't buy, can't beg, can't steal! Had he anything to trade? His name must still mean something. . . .

With gathering hope, he hurried toward the house. It was an idea, at least.

JEAN WAS sleeping with her head on the kitchen table. "I should have made her go to bed," he told himself reproachfully. He tiptoed past her and into the central hallway, cranked the handle of the old-fashioned wall telephone energetically, and gave the number of the Kezar Pharmaceutical lab from memory. For an interminable minute the phone rang fruitlessly, and he thought that it was too early, that no one would be manning the switchboard yet.

"Kezar Industries," answered a tired voice.

"Dr. Thyler, please."

I'll have to do some smooth talking, thought Kent unhappily. *I've never been much good at smooth talk.*

He drummed his fingers impatiently on the battery box. Now that there seemed to be a shred of hope that he might get the Marcillin, every delay was

irksome. What was happening in the barn? Had any more cows died? And how was Rupert?

"I'm sorry, but Dr. Thyler isn't in yet." The man seemed to be stifling a yawn. "I'm just the night-watchman, but I could leave a note. . . ."

Kent hesitated a moment, wondering if he should call Dr. Thyler at his home. To show his anxiety wouldn't put him in the best bargaining position, but on the other hand, even a bushel of Marcillin wouldn't help if he didn't get it soon.

He put through the call.

Dr. Thyler sounded sleepy. The slight irritation in his voice gave way to surprise when Kent gave his name.

"Roberts!" he chirruped. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Kent swallowed hard to keep from saying the words that rushed into his mind, and said with as much cordiality as he could muster, "I have a little problem here on my farm that I thought you might be interested in. My cattle are ill with one of the Martian diseases—"

"Really?" Dr. Thyler sounded vaguely amused. "I can't imagine how that can concern me. Except that I feel for you, Roberts, I really do. Accept my sympathy."

Kent clenched his fist. "It occurred to me that Kezar Industries have done no experiments on Marcillin for veterinary purposes. My herd is fairly well known among cattle breeders. I imagine my name is still well known to the general public, due to the rather extensive publicity after the discovery of Marcillin. I thought that if you would be interested in trying Marcillin on my herd—"

"Really," Thyler interrupted impatiently. "We aren't interested in publicity at this time. As you know, we are having difficulty meeting orders from the medical profession."

Kent fought down the picture of men and women dying for want of the drug that he knew he could produce in quantity if it weren't for fools such as the one to whom he was talking.

"You are looking forward, I suppose,"

Kent said, "to the day when Marcillin will be more generally available? I thought this might be an opportunity to open an additional market against that day."

Thyler was momentarily silent, and Kent hoped that he was imagining another company sending rockets to Mars. An unlikely possibility in the near future, but one that should be worrisome to Kezar.

"I'm afraid we wouldn't be interested," said Dr. Thyler. "The cost of treating a whole herd would be prohibitive. If you are interested in doing publicity work for Kezar, however, I might be able to offer you an interesting proposition. It would be dependent on your signing a guarantee that you would abide by the company security rules, of course."

"Meaning that you want me to be a party to your conspiracy? No, thanks, Thyler. I might make an honest deal with murderers, but that doesn't mean that I'll join them in their dirty work! So help me, I'll produce Marcillin yet and wreck your scheme. And as for what I think of you—"

KENT slammed the receiver on the hook, aware that there are some messages that the telephone company objects to transmitting.

He was trembling with rage. So they thought that they could buy him!

Jean was standing in the doorway, eyes dark with reproach. "Oh, Kent!" she said. "You didn't have to get angry at him."

"I guess I cooked our goose that time, didn't I?" he agreed ruefully. "After that, I'd be surprised if they'd sell it to me even if I did have the money. Even if I did sign all the stuff they require now."

He started slowly toward the door. "Milking time," he said. "Today, at least—"

He was half-way to the barn when the phone started ringing.

It couldn't be anything of conse-

quence, but

Jean beckoned from the hall as he burst through the door.

"Good morning, Dr. Roberts," said an unfamiliar voice with executive briskness. "Dr. Thyler tells me that you have proposed an interesting experiment. Am I right in understanding that you will give us permission to use your name in connection with any results we might obtain?"

Jean leaned forward eagerly, trying to hear what was being said. Kent crossed his fingers and held them up for her to see.

"I'll be happy to endorse the use of Marcillin for veterinary purposes," Kent said slowly. "I have great faith in its effectiveness. I believe that its merits deserve considerable publicity. I take it that this is an offer to carry out my proposal? If so, something had better be done soon, because this disease seems to work fast!"

"As you know," the smooth voice continued, "the expense of an extensive treatment such as you propose is rather great. However, we are considering an offer of Marcillin for use on one animal."

"One animal," repeated Kent with sinking heart. Still, if that animal were Rupert, the bull, they might still manage to stay on here at the farm.

"All right," he said. "I want it understood that I won't sign anything beyond the usual intention-of-use papers, however. Nothing more long-term than those applying to the use of this particular dose."

The man laughed lightly. "This isn't an attempt to buy you off, Roberts. I understand that you have made certain threats concerning the propagation of Marcillin. You will understand, then, that in the interests of company security, we may want to search your premises first for the presence of hidden laboratory equipment."

Kent sighed impatiently. "I suppose I should be thanking you," he said. "I'll be happy to abide by your rules in this case. But please hurry! I can't guaran-

tee to keep these cattle alive much longer."

"Our local representative will be out as soon as we can contact him," assured the voice.

He hung up.

"It's all right?" asked Jean. She was quite literally biting her finger nails.

"I think we can make it," he said, for the first time really believing it himself. "Rupert, at least, will recover. Unless—"

He rushed out to the barn, overcome with suspicion that the bull was already dead. He wasn't.

Kent paced nervously through the barn, noting the generally deteriorated condition of the animals, wishing that the local Kezar representative would hurry.

WHEN he heard the truck approaching he rushed out. The local representative climbed down and extended his hand.

"Harkins is the name," he offered cordially. "Glad to meet you, Dr. Roberts, glad to meet you! Understand you're planning to do some experimenting for the Kezar people. Glad to hear it. Heard a while back that you and them had had a falling out. Don't guess it was very good publicity for us. Guess they're glad to have something to show to them reporters that said some things about it— Well, now, if you'll come to the house, I have some papers for you to sign."

So that's it, thought Kent. My name is supposed to overcome some unfavorable publicity. That's why they phoned back, even after I insulted Dr. Thyler.

He signed the notice of intention to use the Marcillin for therapeutic purposes. He signed the affidavit stating that he was not an employee of any drug firm or research laboratory (as if they didn't know!). He signed an affidavit stating that he possessed no chemical or biological laboratory equipment. The papers seemed endless. Kent looked out at the barn apprehensively.

"Why don't they just make me sign one promising not to try to propagate this dose instead of all these conditions of sales?" he growled.

Harkins looked shocked. "Couldn't do that," he clucked. "That would be— why, it would be monopolistic!"

So Kent scrawled his signature again and again, hand trembling with his desperate haste.

"Now let's hurry with that stuff," he said. "Please."

"Well, now," the little man said. "They said that you was a special case. Said that I was supposed to search for lab equipment. Said that you had agreed to it." He peered at Kent anxiously as though he were afraid he might refuse.

Kent sighed. "Go ahead," he said bitterly. "Look in the barn. Look through the house. Don't forget to turn over the hay!" It was no use. He shouldn't have expected a miracle. The Marcillin would be too late!

"Why can't you just give the injection yourself?" Kent cried. "Why worry about what I'll do with it?"

The little man picked up the papers and fussily straightened the edges.

"Don't know a thing about giving them," he confessed. "Just sell the stuff to doctors, mostly. Don't know much about farm equipment, either. Maybe you'd best come with me and tell me what it's all for."

So Kent was compelled to trail after Harkins, fuming inwardly at the meticulous precision with which he seemed determined to examine the premises.

"What's this thing?" Harkins asked sharply, pointing an accusing finger at the cream separator. Kent attempted to explain.

"That there centrifugal stuff looks like lab equipment to me," Harkins asserted. "Better help me move it out to the truck."

"But, look!" objected Kent. "This is so foolish! You can watch me give the injection. Let's not waste any more time. You'll know where the Marcillin goes! I'll give you the empty ampoule

to take back with you."

"Oh, I'll have to take it, anyway," the little man assured him. "They said not to leave no lab equipment, though."

He helped Harkins move the separator to the truck, trying to hurry him, trying to salvage a few minutes from this senseless waste of time.

Finally Harkins was satisfied.

"Where's this here animal you're going to use it on?" he inquired.

Kent knew what they were going to find when they entered the barn, knew with fatalistic certainty as they approached Rupert's stall. The bull lay still and glassy-eyed.

"He's dead," Kent said.

ONE more failure. There went the farm. They would have to salvage what they could from its sale. He and Jean would be lucky if they could clear their debts. . . .

Harkins fidgeted impatiently. "Let's get on with it," he prompted. "Can't spend the whole day here!"

Kent turned to him, not comprehending for the moment. But, of course, it made no difference to Kezar Industries whether it was Rupert or merely one of the herd of cows that Marcillin cured! Dully he looked them over, picked Butter Belle, one of the surviving ones in the scene of general carnage. A good producer, too. Not the best, but good.

He gave the injection with a practiced hand. Harkins watched him, clucking sociably. "Hope you know what a treasure you're using there," he admonished. "Worth its weight in emeralds. Not many as can afford it."

Kent briefly considered breaking the little man's neck. No, it was too late now to do any good. He should have done that when Harkins first came. It would have saved time.

Jean was waiting for him by the kitchen door, hands twisted in her apron, eyes bright with hope.

"No good," he said shortly. He didn't look at her while he explained.

"Well," she said with false cheerful-

ness, "you can always get another job."

"Sure, sure," he agreed unsteadily. "As a ditch digger. Garbage collector. My opportunities are too numerous to mention!"

"You're just tired," she said sturdily. "Up all night! You go lie down. I'll take care of—which one is it?"

"Butter Belle. Better take her out of the barn. It's easier than moving the others."

He was tired. Tired from sleepless hours, tired from seeing injustice done. He lay down on top of the patterned coverlet, boots and all, and slept.

It must have been late afternoon when he again awakened. He could hear Jean in the kitchen. With a sudden pang of conscience, he remembered that she, too, had been up all night, except for a nap with her head on the kitchen table. With guilty haste he splashed cold tap water on his face, rubbed it briskly with the rough towel, and, reflecting that he could wait to shave, hurried into the kitchen.

Her face looked as though she might have been crying. Or was she just tired? Anyway, she smiled with determined cheerfulness.

He pulled her to him and cradled her head against his shoulder and ran his fingers through her fine brown hair. He felt better. "We'll get along, I guess," he started, then put his hand on her forehead. "Your face is hot!" he said with sudden alarm.

"I do feel a little woozy," she admitted. "These late hours! Or maybe I'm just getting old!"

He sent her to bed. She went readily enough, reminding him first that he hadn't had anything to eat all day. "Eggs in the ice-box, cheese, fix yourself toast. . . ."

He scrambled some eggs, telling himself he was a fool to worry about Jean. She was just tired. He was an alarmist to think immediately of disease. Just because she was hot and tired.

How do we know what these alien germs will attack? his mind prodded

him. *What makes you think it was a disease just of cattle?*

He laid down his toast half eaten and hurried into the bedroom. The room was stifling. He opened the window. Jean was already asleep under the pile of blankets. Extra blankets. He pulled them away from her face and laid his hand against it. She was burning hot. As he watched her, she shivered. Without opening her eyes, she reached for the blankets, pulled them tightly around her. She continued to shake.

He stood there appalled. It was only flu. It had to be! She was tired, run-down from over-work. . . .

Which would make her more susceptible to Martian germs as well as native ones, his mind said relentlessly.

He rushed into the hall to phone the doctor. His hand was shaking as he turned the crank.

THE doctor was maddeningly soothing. "Probably just flu. Keep her down. I'll drop in some time this evening."

Kent put the receiver back on the hook and leaned his head against the wall. And if it weren't flu? He broke into a cold sweat as he realized that he had nothing to bid in the Marcillin market. He had used the last Marcillin he would ever see. He had eaten his cake. For Butter Belle, a pure-bred Guernsey—

Which reminded him that she needed milking.

He couldn't find her at first. Jean had staked her out somewhere. Then he heard a plaintive mooing south of the barn.

Butter Belle was a living recommendation for Marcillin. Marvelous stuff, Marcillin. She flicked her tail pertly and fixed him with a clear mild eye.

He looked back at her resentfully. She had had Marcillin, while Jean—

I won't think about it, he told himself, trying to fill his mind with other things.

I wonder what the Marcillin is doing to the lactic acid bacilli, he thought as he

directed the stream of milk into the pail. *Probably the milk won't sour. Maybe spoil instead.*

Wonder if I crawled to Kezar on bended knee, they'd let me have Marcillin?

That was the answer, of course! Maybe they'd still take him back if he signed all their damned papers. He would promise never to think of Marcillin again if he could get it for Jean that way!

He hurried to the house, pausing only to set the milk by the back steps. Fool thing to do, carrying it to the house with him. It would have to be thrown away, of course.

Dr. Thyler would be surprised to get two calls from him in one day— He hesitated, his hand hovering over the phone. If it were just flu— Maybe he should wait for the doctor's diagnosis.

He wandered into the kitchen and paused indecisively. The doctor might not come for hours. He decided to wait just thirty minutes, and if the doctor hadn't come, he would call Kezar. Selling out! But he had seen too vividly today the results of delay.

The minutes ticked by slowly. He looked in the bedroom; Jean seemed the same. He made himself some coffee, then set it on the table and forgot to drink it. Only ten minutes! He went to the back door and opened it to peer down the road in the direction from which the doctor would come.

The milk pail was still sitting there by the back stairs. It seemed as good a time as any to dump it. He stepped out and bent to lift it.

The froth on top of the pail was breaking down in numerous minute explosions. Kent paused momentarily. There was a thin pinkish film floating on the surface where it showed through the foam. He stirred it curiously with his finger-tip. The color disappeared. It might have been just reflected from an iridescent bubble. Under layers of worry that filled his mind, curiosity stirred.

Kent stepped back into the kitchen, picked up his cup, and emptied the cold

coffee. He rinsed it carefully under the hot water tap. He stepped out and thoughtfully filled the cup with milk from the pail. Returning, he set it on the closed lid of the stove in the warm spot over the pilot light.

He started more coffee over the other burner. Opened the door and looked down the road. Was that the doctor's car approaching? He breathed a sigh of relief and prepared to go and greet him when the car entered the yard. The car swept past. Some neighboring farmer.

Kent stepped back into the room, darkened now by the approach of evening. He switched on the overhead light and tiptoed across the hall to the bedroom. Jean was still sleeping. Her breathing seemed shallow, irregular.

He wandered back to the kitchen and looked anxiously at the clock. A few more minutes to go before he phoned Kezar. He took down a clean cup from the cupboard and went to the stove to pour more coffee, glancing into the cup of milk as he did so.

FOR an endless moment he stared at it, afraid to believe what his eyes were telling him. He was dreaming. He was insane, seeing what he wanted to see, hallucinating a wish—

His heart thudded as he carried the milk over to the light. The surface was studded with tiny islands of familiar reddish-gray color. Marcillin! He couldn't be mistaken. The particular hue of Marcillin was unmistakable. For that matter, what else could have grown in the milk? The Marcillin would have taken care of any other micro-organisms. There must have been a few

spores of Marcillin mold in the otherwise pure extract that had been injected into Butter Belle.

With infinite care, he set the cup back on the stove. No need now to listen for the doctor's car. With sudden briskness, Kent charged about the kitchen. Flu or mysterious Martian disease? What did it matter? Here was the cure.

More precious than emeralds, Harkins had said. Fervently Kent echoed the thought. More precious than emeralds to him at this moment.

But tomorrow? Kent laughed aloud. Tomorrow it would be so cheap that even the poorest peasant working in the rice fields of China could use it!

* * * *

"But I thought it grew only in cold places," Jean said when she woke. He tightened his arms around her.

"That was the mistake I made, too," he admitted. "I forgot that the natural habitat isn't necessarily the optimum one."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that the mold did the best it could on Mars, barely surviving in an environment that provided those things which it found absolutely essential. Milk apparently provides those same essentials, plus much more ideal conditions of growth. Warmth. Moisture. In other words, if the mold were thinking, he'd probably say, 'Mars was never like this!'"

"Well, was it?" she asked playfully.

He put his finger under her chin and turned her face toward him. One long kiss later he murmured huskily, "What do you think?"



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